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FROM CHINA TO HEAVEN: REMEMBERING FR. CHARLES MCCARTHY, SJ, AN AMERICAN JESUIT IN CHINA DURING AN ERA OF TRANSITION

By Anthony E. Clark (*Catholic World Report*, “Clark on China,” August 2012)

An American Jesuit in China: From California to Shanghai

The great German polymath, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, once wrote that, “The moment one commits oneself, then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help. A whole stream of events issue from the decision, raising in one’s favor all manner of incidents and meetings and material assistance which no one could have dreamed would come his way.” Some rare and adventurous missionaries in China have left such extraordinary footprints in the Middle Kingdom so as to confirm Goethe’s assertion. Father Charles McCarthy, SJ, was such a man, whose uncommon mixture of intellect and piety fashioned one of China’s most tireless evangelists for the Gospel, and a gentle friend of the Chinese people. McCarthy’s life in China is hardly imaginable to most people; he was detained twice while in Asia, interned first by the Japanese from 1942-1945, and then later imprisoned by the Chinese from 1953-1957 during the radical Maoist era, and through all of his trials Fr. McCarthy remained an unwavering example of the Ignatian spirit, to, as Saint Ignatius of Loyola advised his successors, “give and not count the cost.”

Having read several of McCarthy’s richly prosaic letters home to friends, confreres, and family, I see in his tenor the same holiness that I have discerned from the hundreds of letters I have read by canonized saints. His life was marked by surrender to Divine Providence, and from his first days in China it was clear that he loved the Chinese who he befriended as his family away from his native America. Charles McCarthy was born into a devout Catholic family in Modesto, California, in 1911, moved to San Francisco in 1915, and by the age of eighteen he had entered the Society of Jesus. He was ordained a priest in 1939, and arrived at Beijing, China, in 1941, where he studied Chinese at the famous Maison Chabanel, a house established by French Jesuits to train Society priests for the China mission. By 1948, during the most turbulent years of transition, as the Communists and Nationalists made their most desperate and violent bids for China, Fr. Charles had become one of the most important Catholic journalists in Asia, writing for the Catholic Central Bureau, the Hua Ming News Service, National Catholic Warfare Council Correspondent, and

Fides International. He recounted the events of one of China's most turbulent eras from the frontline, and was himself unwittingly drawn into the maelstrom of national conflict.

On December 3, 1952, the American priest from California wrote a summoning letter from the Jesuit mission in Shanghai:

During the first months of the year, intense and multiform pressure was brought to bear on Catholics. The authorities wanted them to form a schismatic national Church which would not be Catholic at all. They were urged to make accusations against their bishop, priests, sisters and 'obstinate' lay leaders.

In closing his letter, Fr. Charles exclaimed that, "The Faith is firmly planted in China now; and the same grace which helped it enter through Canton's forbidden gates, will foster its future growth." In 1953, McCarthy no longer wrote of "others" who had been arrested; he was himself arrested on June 15th. Fr. McCarthy was accused of being an "ideological saboteur," and spent the next four years in five different prisons. One of his cells was five feet by eight – occupied by six people! – and when he was finally released in 1957, he weighed only 107 pounds, on a six-foot frame. He returned home to America by boat, and when Fr. Charles at last sailed under the Golden Gate Bridge – home again – he was met by his three brothers, Walter, Alex, and Robert and their families. Walter's ten-year-old daughter, Mary Jo, was also there, and now, over a half-century later, I was able to chat with Mary Jo over a cup of coffee in Spokane's South Hill neighborhood, where she and her husband, Tom, now live. We spoke about her relationship with Father McCarthy, who was one of the last two foreign priests to be released from prison during the Maoist era, and about his particular love for China after so many years a missionary there.

Mary Jo McCarthy Reynolds Remembers Her Uncle in Letters and Anecdotes

One of the first topics we discussed regarding Fr. Charles was the unique depth of his commitment to the priesthood. Mary Jo underscored her uncle's dedication to his ministry as a Catholic priest, and she provided me with an excerpt from a talk Fr. Charles delivered to the Serra Club in 1946, when he had briefly returned to the U.S. to complete a degree in journalism at Marquette University. He recalled:

The Catholic missionaries had been forewarned about the war and probable internment. Most Protestant missionaries returned to America or Europe before Pearl Harbor. They had wives and children to protect. But the Catholics stayed. The

Chinese Christians are still like young shoots that need nurturing, or like lambs that need protection, and we, their shepherds, felt obliged to stay with them as long as possible.

In a letter to a confrere in 1948, Fr. Charles outlined his reasons for remaining in China, despite the obvious risks. “The effect of our departure on the community would be serious,” he asserted, “and might start some sort of panic. It would also further discourage our Chinese Jesuits, who are deserving of any comfort and strength that we can give them.”

“Fr. Charles was at Marquette when I was born,” said Mary Jo, and her first memory of him was when he arrived in San Francisco after his release from prison. Mary Jo’s father, Walter, read all of Fr. Charles’ letters to the family, and “We prayed for him every night, in my grammar school . . . all the time. He was a presence in our lives; he was part of the family.” When they first saw Fr. Charles, “We just ran up and hugged him.” Mary Jo continued:

We knew him. We had corresponded with him so often; we knew all about him and he knew all about us. I asked my father if he ever talked about prison, and my father said, ‘No, if Charlie wanted to talk about that he would.’ And we never asked.

But Mary Jo did note that even though her uncle did not speak about his experiences in China, he did write about them, and he wrote very often. Then was an era of transition and turbulence; China’s civil war between the Nationalists and Communists raged around him.

In a letter to his brother Walter in 1949, Fr. Charles McCarthy described in vivid terms the apprehensions of living in Shanghai at that time: “There’s a feeling that almost any letter may be the last one out for a long time. . . . from our perch the international situation seems to be deteriorating constantly. . . . But perhaps we can at least suffer for the souls in China.” Conditions grew more precarious each day, and in another letter home in April 1951, Fr. Charles wrote, “For months I’ve felt like a tom turkey in the third week of November: no fooling! Never know from day to day when we’ll be kicked, and whether it’ll be kicked out of China or into jail.” In October he wrote to his brother Walter: “You’ll probably have a jailbird brother soon.” And in November he wrote one of his most stirring letters:

We have never been so conscious of the honor and privilege that comes with being a Catholic, a priest, a Jesuit – as nowadays. Twenty-one of our brothers are in custody in this land now, and the prospect is that the number will grow. All sorts of charges,

but the real reason plainly is their loyalty and love for Christ and the true interest of souls – for love of Jesus.

In 1953 he was arrested on a June evening, just past midnight, when a “cold-faced man entered his room and announced: ‘You will come with me.’ And he left his texts, papers and notes. . . .”

The first two years while Fr. Charles was in prison he was not permitted to write letters to his family in California. Mary Jo said, “For Fr. Charles that was heart-wrenching. . . . We heard about him from the Red Cross, so we knew he was alive. In one letter he wrote that it was confusing to the authorities, as he wrote often to his ‘brothers’ in Christ and to other ‘Fathers.’” They got confused because he wrote to so many ‘brothers’ and ‘fathers.’ He and other priests would write, ‘Dear Brother’ and ‘Dear Father.’ He recounted in an article in 1971 how he was able to say Mass while in prison. Through the Red Cross he managed to receive hosts wedged between Necco Wafers, and wine identified as “vitalizing medicine.”

The parcels were, of course, most welcome. . . . I noticed in the parcel, as I signed a receipt for it, a box neatly wrapped in cellophane, with a printed label: ‘PABULUM VITAE: A time-tried nutriment to supply the vital deficiencies of those deprived of their ordinary balanced diet. INSTRUCTIONS: Take one teaspoon of the liquid, and one wafer each morning before breakfast. DOMINI CORP. Box 1212 Los Gatos, Calif.’ In the box was a bottle of dark red fluid, the liquid part of this vitalizing medicine; then there was a glass cylinder or tube, which contained a dry type of candy, Necco Wafers, of various colors and flavors, but between each of the wafers were thin layers of unleavened bread, as separators.

With these gifts Fr. McCarthy was able to offer Mass in his tiny cell. His hands, as another imprisoned priest once said, had become a beautiful cathedral in which the Holy Sacrifice was made along with invisible choirs of angels.

As we spoke I grew more curious why Fr. Charles did not simply return home to America as the situation in China grew more perilous. In one of the documents Mary Jo shared with me, an article he wrote in 1974, Fr. McCarthy recounts a moment when his interrogators asked him why he did not leave China long ago. “Couldn’t you take a hint and go away?” they asked, “Your government must have given you orders to stay! Who gave you these orders?” Quoting the Divine Master, Fr. Charles responded: “I am the Good

Shepherd, and I lay down my life for my sheep. As the Father sent me, I send you.’ Yes, I had orders to stay from Christ!”

An Ambassador for Friendship: Building a Global Family

Among the characteristics of Fr. McCarthy’s life in Asia were his commitment to building a global family and his abiding love of China and the Chinese people. As we spoke, Mary Jo often recalled that, “He was just part of the family,” and one gets the sense that people all over the world would say the same about Fr. Charles. While he was in the Philippines, long after his release from prison, Fr. Charles learned that the Chinese there were not allowed the same social status as the native Filipinos. “They didn’t have the rights that Filipinos had there,” said Mary Jo.

Opportunities were shut off from them. . . . Fr. Charles was an advocate for these Chinese people. He was instrumental in helping the Chinese as an exponent of the integration of the Chinese in the Philippines. He was in the forefront of amending the citizenship provision for the Chinese.

In order to better work towards Chinese-Filipino integration, he became a Filipino citizen in 1979 and wrote books to help improve the status of Chinese in the Philippines.

Fr. McCarthy’s important role in Chinese integration in the Philippines was featured in the Chinese-Filipino digest, the *Monthly Tulay*, December 8, 1991, where it is noted that, “Fr. McCarthy worked day and night writing to convention delegates, media men, government offices, and magazine and news publications to espouse the cause of the Philippine Chinese.” When in 1974, as President Marcos decreed easier access for Chinese naturalization it was, as the article recounts, “a recognition of the efforts of Fr. McCarthy,” and for his tireless advocacy of Chinese in the Philippines, he was awarded De Salle University’s prestigious Signum Meriti Medal in 1981. Jenny Go, who was once the principal of Xavier School in Manila, stated that Fr. Charles, “was a wonderful man whose heart was always in China.” Yet it is astonishing that despite his activities in distant parts of the world – Asia or Europe – Fr. McCarthy always managed to maintain steady correspondence with his relatives in America.

Remembering Fr. Charles’ closeness to his own family, Mary Jo recalled a letter from China. “He wrote to his mother when his father died. He wanted to embrace her. He wanted to wrap his arms around her. My father says, ‘That’s how he felt about all of us.’” Whenever

it was possible, Fr. Charles traveled through the U.S. to visit his family. The McCarthy family has been, and remains, a family powerfully united in love and faith, and as Mary Jo and I concluded our discussion, she re-emphasized the particular bond between Fr. McCarthy and his siblings. In one of Walter McCarthy's last letters to his brother in the Philippines, dated April 10, 1991, he wrote to "Charlie":

Please know that I think of you constantly and pray for you. I wish the Philippines were closer so I would visit you and talk with you and tell you how much you mean to me. You were always a big brother and a real friend. I'll always be praying for you.

From China to Heaven

Typical of Fr. Charles' beautiful correspondence home, he signed off a letter to his brother, Walter, dated November 28, 1951, in the most tender and stirring words a priest can render his beloved family. In the midst of bitter conflicts between the Church and China's new authorities, and at a time of anxious uncertainty about his own safety, he wrote these lines:

Above all, give my love to Peg, Charles, Mary Jo, and Clare Ann, to Al, Bob and Mary, Frank, Kathleen, Bobby & Tommy. Your names are on my lips a few moments before the sacred words of Consecration morning after morning at the altar, and I'm sure they wing straight to heaven by angel couriers to gain God's graces, protection and blessings for you all.

Just when he himself needed God's "protection and blessings" most, it was for others that Fr. Charles offered his Masses. And in his final remarks, he asks his family at home in California to, "Please keep up the prayers for China and the for the Church here. . . . Your loving brother, Charles." The end of this extraordinary life came in 1991, after many decades of service to God and the Church in Asia. On December 15, 1991, just two weeks after his passing, Fr. Ted Taheny, SJ, gave the funeral homily for Fr. Charles in the chapel of the Jesuit community at the University of San Francisco. He said: "Today would have been Father Charles' 80th birthday. Today is the 14th day of his birth into the company of the Lord's saints."

[**Note:** Special thanks are due to Mary Jo McCarthy Reynolds, Fr. Charles McCarthy's niece, and Walt McCarthy, his younger brother, for kindly providing me with materials used to write this column. For more information about Fr. McCarthy, especially remembrances from his brother, Walter McCarthy, see the Summer 2011 issue of *Genesis*, the alumni quarterly of Saint Ignatius College Preparatory in San Francisco. Also see Fr. Paul Mariani's, SJ, recent book, *Church Militant: Bishop Kung and Catholic Resistance in Communist Shanghai*, Harvard University Press, 2011.]